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### Language and social languages

We have now looked at the background to sociocultural approaches to language and literacy. Chapters 7 and 8 will develop a specific theory of language and literacy in society. Before that, however, we need to discuss the nature of language and ways of analyzing it. This chapter deals with meaning in its sociocultural contexts, the next with the analysis of coherent stretches of language such as arguments and stories. In both cases, our concern is with the sociocultural nature of meaning and communication, but with due deference to human agency and responsibility.

At the outset, however, we need to be clear that any language—English, for example—is not one monolithic thing. Rather, each and every language is composed of many sub-languages, which I will call “social languages.” Social languages stem from the fact that any time we act or speak, we must accomplish two things: (1) we must make clear *who* we are, and (2) we must make clear *what* we are doing (Wieder and Pratt 1990a, b). This sounds simple, but it is not. First, we are all, despite our common illusions about the matter, not a single *who* but a great many different *whos* in different contexts. Second, one and the same speaking or acting can count as different things in different contexts. We accomplish different *whos* and *whats* through using different social languages.

To exemplify these points, consider an example involving an upper middle-class Anglo-American young woman—let us use “Jane” as a pseudonym for her. Jane was attending a college course of mine on language and communication. The course had discussed the ways in which each of us, when we are talking to different sorts of people, shift the style of our speech. During a class discussion, Jane had claimed that she herself did not shift her language when speaking to different people, but, rather,

was consistent from context to context. In fact, to do otherwise, she said, would be “hypocritical,” a failure to “be oneself.”

In order to support her claim, Jane decided to record herself talking to her parents and to her boyfriend. In both cases, she decided to talk about a story her class had read and discussed, so as to be sure that, in both contexts, she was talking about the same thing. The story had been used in the class to focus discussion on the different ways in which people argue about moral values. In the story, a woman named Abigail wants to get across a river to see her lover, Gregory. A river boat captain (Roger) says he will take her only if she sleeps with him. In desperation she does so—only to see her true love, Gregory. But when she arrives and tells Gregory what happened, he disowns her and sends her away. There is more to the story (Abigail seeks revenge), but this is enough for our purposes here.

In explaining to her parents why she thought Gregory was the worst character in the story, the young woman said the following:

Well, when I thought about it, I don't know, it seemed to me that Gregory should be the most offensive. He showed no understanding for Abigail, when she told him what she was forced to do. He was callous. He was hypocritical, in the sense that he professed to love her, then acted like that.

Earlier, in her discussion with her boyfriend, in an intimate setting, she had also explained why she thought Gregory was the worst character. In this context she said:

What an ass that guy was, you know, her boyfriend. I should hope, if ever I did that to see you, you would shoot the guy. He uses her and he says he loves her. Roger never lies, you know what I mean?

It was clear—clear even to Jane—that Jane had used two very different forms of language, one to her parents and another to her boyfriend. These different forms of language are, of course, both English. But they are



quite different, nonetheless. We can say that they constitute different social languages. Different social languages (and there are, for any one language, like English, a great many) make visible and recognizable two different social identities, two different versions of who one is.

The linguistic differences are everywhere to be seen in the two texts. To her parents, Jane carefully hedges her claims ("I don't know," "it seemed to me"), to her boyfriend, she makes her claims straight out. To her boyfriend, she uses terms like "ass" and "guy," while to her parents she uses more formal (and "school"-like) terms like "offensive," "understanding," "callous," "hypocritical," and "professed." She also uses more school-like syntax to her parents ("it seemed to me that . . ."). "He showed no understanding for Abigail, when . . ." "He was hypocritical in the sense that . . ." than she does to her boyfriend ("... that guy, you know, her boyfriend"; "Roger never lies, you know what I mean?"). She repeatedly addresses her boyfriend as "you," and thereby notes his social involvement as a listener, but does not directly address her parents in this way. To her parents, she explicitly introduces each character by name (e.g., Gregory) and then re-refers to the introduced character by a pronoun (e.g., "he"), the way we would in school-based writing. This contrasts with how she singles out and refers back to Gregory in the text to her boyfriend: "that guy . . . you know, her boyfriend . . . you would shoot the guy . . . he uses her . . . he says he loves her." In this latter case, the first "that guy" stands for Gregory and the second "the guy" stands for the hypothetical guy that might do to Jane what Roger did to Abigail. While the "he" pronouns all refer to Gregory, Gregory is introduced as "that guy," thus, not by his name, but by the role—"her boyfriend"—he shares with her listener. This use of the two "guy"s, by the way, effectively equates the moral standing of Gregory and Roger. In the text to her boyfriend, she leaves several points to be inferred, points that she spells out more explicitly to her parents (e.g., her boyfriend must infer that Gregory is being accused of being a hypocrite from the information that though Roger is bad, at least he does not lie, which Gregory did in claiming to love Abigail).

All in all, Jane appears to use more "school-like" language to her parents. Her language to her parents stands on its own, requiring little inferring on their part. It distances them as listeners from social and emotional involvement with herself or what she is saying, while stressing, perhaps, their cognitive involvement with the information she is "transmitting" and their judgment of her and her "intelligence." Her language to her boyfriend stresses, on the other hand, social and affective involvement, solidarity, and co-participation in meaning making.

This young woman is making visible and recognizable two different versions of who she is—one for her parents and one for her boyfriend. None of us speaks a single, uniform language, nor is any one of us a single, uniform identity. The different social languages we use allow us to render multiple *whos* (we are) and *whats* (we are doing) socially visible.

Different people use different social languages on different occasions. Had the same sort of social language been used by someone from a different social or cultural group than Jane's at dinner with their parents, it might very well have come across as rude and distant. Additionally, Jane would not have used the same sort of social language she used with her boyfriend in a different context, for example during her college classroom discussions. Finally, Jane might well use a different social language altogether when talking to her parents in a different context. In some sociocultural groups, like Jane's, dinner has become habituated as a time when children display public-sphere and school-based intelligence and accomplishments to parents.

So what we see here—and it is a crucial point—is that the who we are and the what we are doing are really enacted through a three-way simultaneous interaction among (1) our social or cultural group memberships (e.g., Jane's class, ethnic, social, cultural, educational, and gender-based group memberships); (2) a particular social language or mixture of them (e.g., the one Jane used to her parents); and (3) a particular context, that is, set of other people, objects, and locations (e.g., at home at dinner with one's parents).

## Heteroglossia

It is important to extend our discussion of social languages by pointing out that they are very often "impure." That is, when we speak or write, we very often mix together different social languages. This is a practice that the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986; see also Ball and Freedman 2004) called "heteroglossia" (multiple voices). In fact, it is arguable that Jane's social language to her parents is actually a mixture of a form of "everyday" language and aspects of the sorts of social languages used in schools and academic work. There are historical reasons why such a heteroglossic mixture has arisen and survived—having to do with specific ways in which certain sociocultural groups have sought to give their children a "head start" for, and a continuing advantage in, school.